

Language revitalization in a multilingual community: the case of Michif

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Overview

- Métis language community is hard to define, due to cultural multilingualism and geography.
- Unilingual North American society has infiltrated Métis culture.
- Métis share history, music and traditions, but language has become a catalyst for *divisiveness* rather than *unity*.
 - a problem in collaborative revitalization efforts
- Can new technologies and inclusiveness bridge this divide?

1.0 Historical background

- Descendants of French fathers and First Nations mothers
- Emerged as a new identity in the 18th century in Red River Settlements (Manitoba)

Red River communities



Image created by Gabriel Dumont Institute

Multilingualism as traditional aspect of Michif identity

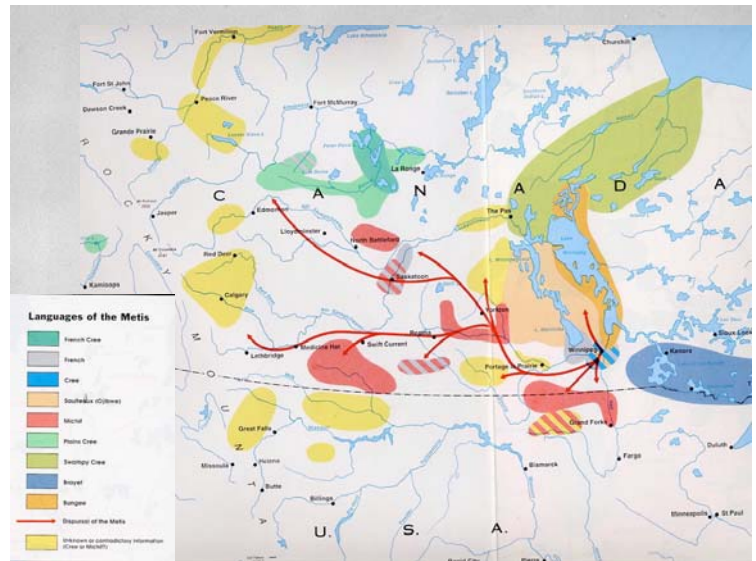
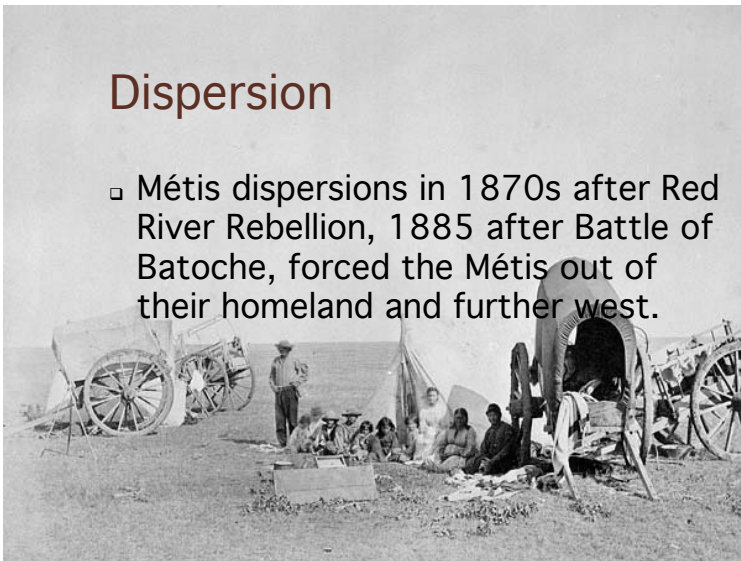
- Métis people were in a privileged position in late 18th and early 19th centuries, and bilingualism/biculturalism was a source of cultural identity and pride
- Métis were often interpreters and guides (Sealey & Lussier 1975)

“they were...exceptionally apt linguists. Most of them spoke at least two languages, French and Cree, and many quickly added other Indian tongues and English...Their own patois, still spoken by them throughout the West, is a mixture of French and Cree or Chipewyan with some English words.”

[Howard 1952:52-53]

Dispersion

- Métis dispersions in 1870s after Red River Rebellion, 1885 after Battle of Batoche, forced the Métis out of their homeland and further west.



Post-dispersion

- Persecuted by both European and First Nations peoples. No status or reserves.
- In 1982, Métis were officially recognized as one of Canada's distinct Aboriginal Peoples in the Constitution Act.

Section 2: "aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada'

http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/consnew_e.html



2.0 Language situation today

- Michif languages
- Many Elders speak one or more Métis languages as well as English
- Most young Métis speak only English
- Language transmission stopped largely as a result of the Indian Residential Schools, starting after 1920.



Multiple Michifs?

- Métis people traditionally identified themselves as "Michif" and not "Metis"
- Natural for a person with a Michif identity to call the language they speak *Michif*
- Speaking *Michif* doesn't mean speaking the same language

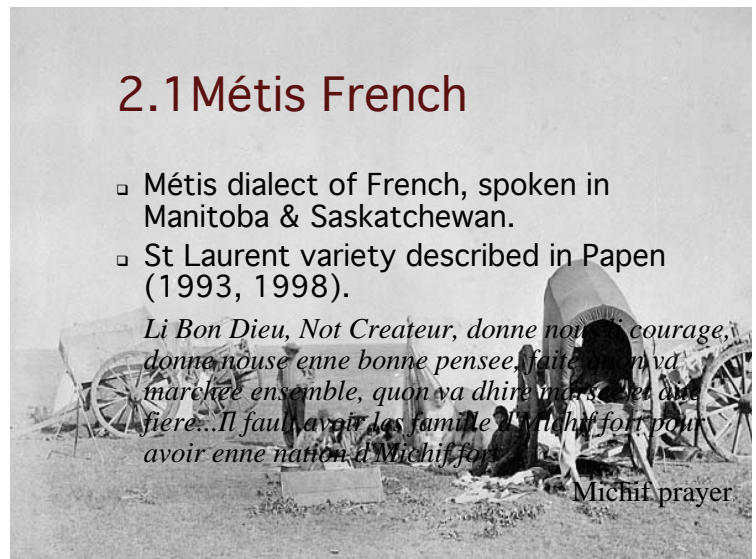


2.1 Métis French

- Métis dialect of French, spoken in Manitoba & Saskatchewan.
- St Laurent variety described in Papen (1993, 1998).

*Li Bon Dieu, Not Createur, donne nous courage,
donne nous enne bonne pensee, faire en va
marchée ensemble, quon va dhire ind's et am
fiere... Il faut avoir les famille d' Michif fort pour
avoir enne nation d' Michif fort*

Michif prayer



2.2 Métis Cree

- 'French Cree' is term in Bakker (1997) to refer to Ile-a-la-Crosse Michif, which may be similar to (same as?) northern AB Michif.
- Unaware of any in-depth study, but Cree structure, with French and possibly Saulteaux (Muehlbauer, *op*) influence.

Michif-Michif

- Language described in Rhodes 1977, 1986, Bakker 1997, Rosen 2007.
- Usually characterized as French-Cree *mixed language*, with noun phrase primarily from French, verb phrase primarily from Cree.

Comparison of languages

□ 'Michif French'

Il garsō pi la pcit fij ijavy...hors, so pci zhwal

□ 'Ile-a-la-Crosse Michif', or Métis Cree

*Iskwe:sis ekwa na:pe:sis i:sahkIcijlk mīlēmwa
wa:pamē:wak*

□ 'Mixed-language Michif'

La pcit fij ci garsō giwa wa:pamē:w tē pci zhwal

Examples in Bakker [1997:134-6]

On Métis language adjustment and attitudes

"... it really depends where you are and who you're with. Honest. I just noticed that too, you know. For instance, *sa prā ci-slpwe:the:ja:n* for 'I have to go.' I'll say that to some of the people here. But with some people I will say *pigo ci-slpwe:the:ja:n*...You know what kind of language they use, and how it fits in. You just don't automatically, you know. They're all Métis, but they talk different, you know."

[Bakker 1997:160]

Métis identity today

"The Métis people constitute a distinct Aboriginal nation largely based in western Canada. The Métis Nation grounds its assertion of Aboriginal nationhood on well-recognized international principles. It has a shared history, a common culture (song, dance, dress, national symbols, etc.), a unique language (**Michif with various regional dialects**), extensive kinship connections from Ontario westward, a distinct way of life, traditional territory and a collective consciousness."

<http://www.metisnation.ca/who/index.html>

Métis organizational structure

- Provincial political organizations from Ontario to BC.
- 'locals' in different communities within the province

Métis 'community'

- The Métis are based on the mixing of cultures & languages.

What is the 'community'?

- Métis speakers of a particular Métis language?
- Métis of a particular province?
- Métis speakers of a particular language of a particular province?
- All Métis people?

Language as identity

- Although there is a common culture of song, dance, dress, food, languages themselves are often not shared.
- Multilingualism may be shared, but not necessarily the actual language.
- Society of unilingualism means multilingualism no longer norm; Métis are affected by this and language becomes divisive.
- Especially true given sensitivity to being 'half-breeds'. Unique language = unique status.
- Michif is unique to Métis, while Saulteaux, Cree, French are spoken by other cultures.

Michif as national language

- Michif designated national Métis language

Whereas the Métis emerged in Canada as a distinct nation with a unique culture; and whereas during the genesis of the Métis Nation, Michif evolved as a distinct language of the Métis Nation; and whereas it is recognized within international law that language is one of the requirements of the establishment of reaffirmation of Nationhood; therefore, it is resolved that the Métis National Council recognize and declare Michif as the historical and official language of the Métis Nation.

Michif declaration July 23, 2000

- Promotion of one language means demotion of others.
- Métis people torn, divided.

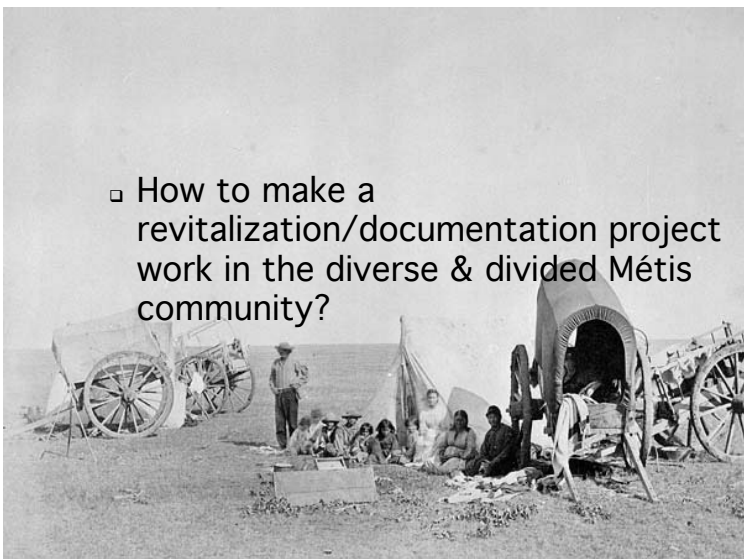
What about revitalization?

- Which language(s) are we revitalizing?
 - The most endangered needs most help right now.
- Community must be involved and committed for revitalization to succeed. (Hinton, Grenoble & Whaley, many others)

2 problems unique to Métis language revitalization

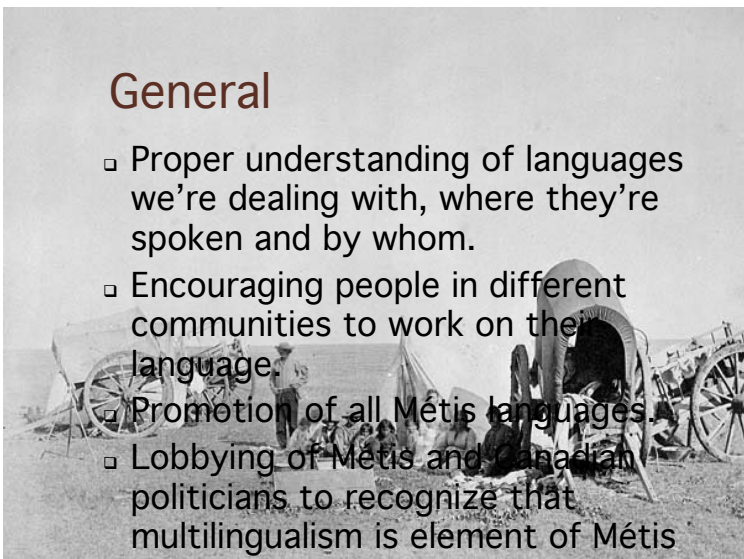
- Geography: due to dispersion of Métis in 19th century and to lack of lands allotted to Métis (other than in Alberta), there is no Métis territory
- Language use: because Métis people were traditionally multilingual, difficult to get whole community behind Michif

- How to make a revitalization/documentation project work in the diverse & divided Métis community?



General

- Proper understanding of languages we're dealing with, where they're spoken and by whom.
- Encouraging people in different communities to work on the language
- Promotion of all Métis languages
- Lobbying of Métis and Canadian politicians to recognize that multilingualism is element of Métis

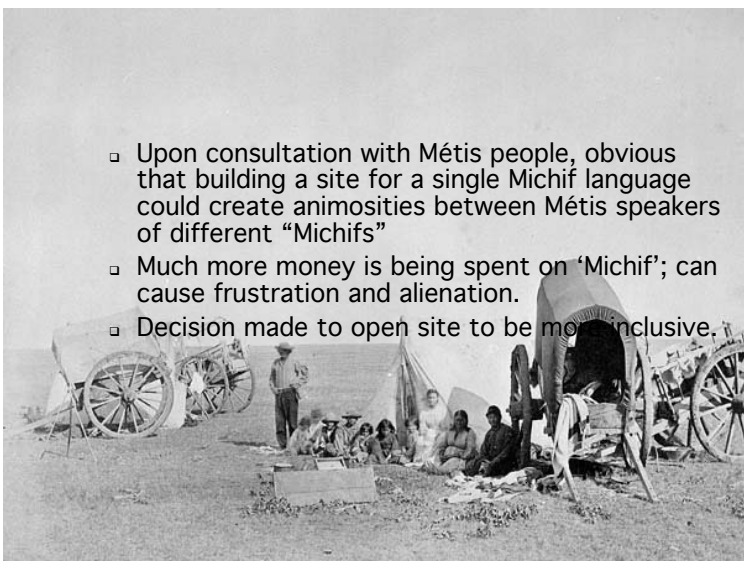


Specific: Michif dictionary project

- "Word-building in Michif"
- SSHRC Aboriginal Grant to research Michif morpho-syntax and build online dictionary from Toolbox database.
- Project was granted specifically for 'Michif' language

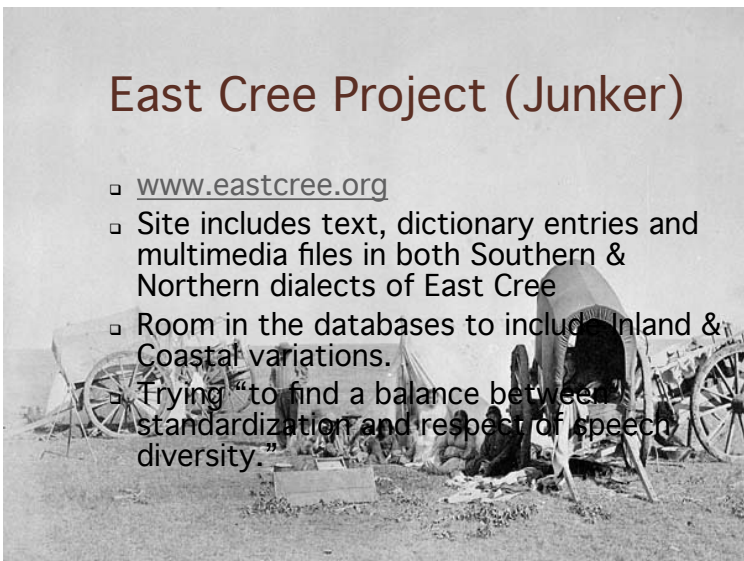


- Upon consultation with Métis people, obvious that building a site for a single Michif language could create animosities between Métis speakers of different "Michifs"
- Much more money is being spent on 'Michif'; can cause frustration and alienation.
- Decision made to open site to be more inclusive.



East Cree Project (Junker)

- www.eastcree.org
- Site includes text, dictionary entries and multimedia files in both Southern & Northern dialects of East Cree
- Room in the databases to include Inland & Coastal variations.
- Trying "to find a balance between standardization and respect of speech diversity."



Michifdictionary.org

- Site under construction, but infrastructure will ensure room in database for other languages, like East Cree site with dialects.
- Since Métis people share culture, visual and print "learning objects" can be used for other Métis languages.



Project and Access to Language Resources for Distributed Learning

- Major community benefits of the project are:
 - access to language resources by a widely dispersed nation; both rural and urban Métis potentially have access.
 - Access to language resources by those involved in school, family and community based language programs; Métis institutions, groups, families and individuals can access and use the resources

New Media and the Internet: Allowing Unity Among Diversity

- New media/Internet make it possible to show the relatedness (and differences) of diverse dialects and languages through:
 - Being able to easily compare dialects/languages and
 - Using the same cultural “visual objects” to support understanding
 - Cross-referencing is easier.
 - Allowing Métis people the opportunity to learn more than one Métis language and return to multilingualism if they so choose.

References

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